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A MOMENTOUS INCIDENT IN THE HISTORY OF ILLINOIS.

By JANE MARTIN JOHNS, Decatur, Illinois.

In the following pages I have carefully refrained from any hearsay or guesswork, and have quoted Mr. Lincoln's history and words as I *remember* to have heard them from his own mouth or pen.

The story of the snow-bound excursion train is the only portion that is not strictly "personal recollections," but is told as it was told me by the ladies who were prominent in its personnel. I am not sure that my dates are correct, and I know of no means of verifying them. There are doubtless hundreds of persons who remember the incidents, but I know of no printed record of the events unless there may be preserved in the Historical Library some copies of the Springfield papers of January, 1855.*

To the close student of history, seeking for cause and effect, no one deed of any one man has ever had such far reaching and momentous results as did that of Mr. Lincoln in suddenly abandoning his cherished party affiliations and personal ambition, when he walked down the aisle of the House of Representatives on that memorable day of February and commanded his adherents to vote for Lyman Trumbull for United States Senator. The cause of free territory was at stake, and although Mr. Lincoln believed that he was "committing political hara-kiri" and "that henceforth he would sink out of sight," he made the supreme sacrifice without a moment's hesitation when he realized that the cause to which he had consecrated his life was endangered. Mr. Trumbull's candidacy had at no time been considered as a serious proposition. He was named merely as a figurehead upon which to hang the Democratic opposition to Senator Douglas. As the nucleus of a future Free Soil party, five men were pledged "to vote for Lyman Trumbull to the bitter

* The Illinois State Historical Library has a file of the State Register and Journal of 1855.

end." Except these five, all the leaders of the Democratic opposition to squatter sovereignty were pledged to Mr. Lincoln. Lieutenant Governor Koerner, John M. Palmer, Norman B. Judd and other prominent Democrats were indefatigable in their efforts to elect Mr. Lincoln, but when the crucial moment came Mr. Lincoln recognized in a moment that the only salvation of the principle of free territory lay in the election of the anti-Nebraska nominee of the Democratic party.

This action of Mr. Lincoln was a death blow to the Whig party, and resulted in the formation of the great Republican party, and ultimately in the preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery and involuntary servitude in the United States.

The cornerstone of Mr. Lincoln's great and eventful career was this sacrifice of personal ambition to principle and the burial of self in his country's welfare.

* * * * *

Illinois rightfully claims Lincoln as her own. Though born in Kentucky, he lived there only long enough to learn that no man, whose father had been compelled to earn his bread by the sweat of his *own* brow, could ever hope to attain social equality or political opportunity where the slaveholder held the ruling power.

Escaping in his boyhood from the deadly upas of slavery, Illinois became his home, developed his character and shaped his destiny.

Preparedness for his great career had begun when, a barefooted boy, he stood where the Transfer House now stands in Lincoln Square, Decatur, "upon the splintered stump of a fallen tree," and made, impromptu, his first political speech. This uncalled for intrusion of a barefooted mud-sill into the realm of politics was typical of Lincoln's entire career, and the applause it received from a hostile audience a forerunner of his future successes.

The spirit of pure democracy, ingrained in Lincoln's character, developed his self-respect, and he instinctively asserted and maintained a position of equality with men of official position and gentle birth. He was probably the first man in southern Illinois who had ever aspired to legislative

honors without the prestige of family position, yet his fellow legislators accepted him at his own valuation and soon accorded him leadership. Though he had always belonged to the minority party in the legislature of Illinois, his strong personality and remarkable political acumen had insured for him personal influence and recognition. Not so in Congress. Elected as a Whig from a Democratic district, and a non-slaveholding State, he soon found that he was handicapped by his lowly birth; that the deadly power of the slaveholding oligarchy made it utterly impossible for the humbly born representative of a free state to acquire position or influence in the Congress of the United States.

One term in Congress had squelched his political ambition, and he returned to Illinois "resolved thenceforth to devote himself to the practice of law and the support of his family."

It had been universally conceded that concession to the slave power had reached its limit in the passage of the fugitive slave law, and that north of Mason and Dixon line slavery and involuntary servitude was forever prohibited.

The platforms of both great political parties were emphatic in their antagonism to further agitation of the slavery question, and had declared the compromise measure of 1852 a final settlement of the dangerous question. Mr. Lincoln held aloof from politics for eight years, but when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and the admission of Kansas and Nebraska into the Union under Mr. Douglas' new doctrine of squatter sovereignty, reopened the battle of the Nation against the extension of slavery into free territory, he buckled on his armor and sprang into the arena, determined to fight slavery to its death. He solemnly consecrated his life to confining slavery within its legal bounds, and to saving from its evil influence the free territory of the United States. To him the fate of the slave was a problem "that God only could solve," and which "must not be allowed to divert the attention of the Nation from the great question of free territory for the white man." He chose the Senate of the United States as his battle field and announced himself as a candidate for the Senate of the United States, and at once bent all his energies to the selection and election of a legislature that would elect him to that position.

The Whig party had always been conservative, and Mr. Lincoln believed that in the success of that party was the Nation's salvation. He deprecated the violence of the Abolitionists and emphatically advised that the injection of the slavery question into the legislative campaign should be carefully avoided. He felt sure that his party would stand by him in resisting further aggression of the slave power, but as a large majority of the Whigs of Illinois were men of southern antecedents, who hated an Abolitionist with an intensity that is almost inconceivable at the present day, he thought it wise to supersede the slavery question in the legislative campaign by one of more absorbing interest.

Know-Nothingism had become the paramount political issue in Illinois. A provision of the Constitution of 1818 read: "In all elections, all white male inhabitants above the age of twenty-one years, having resided in the State six months, shall enjoy the rights of an elector."

The internal improvement scheme had flooded the State with foreign laborers, nine-tenths of whom had allied themselves with the Democratic party, and their vote at any time could be made to control the political situation. This state of affairs was very distasteful to native Americans and threatened the disruption of the Democratic party. The slogan of the Know-Nothings was "America for Americans," and restriction of naturalization to twenty-one years of residence in the United States was the object of the party organization. The Whig party was in the minority, and the Know-Nothings by themselves were powerless, but in union there was strength. Mr. Lincoln seized this opportunity and quietly and secretly canvassed the State, asking men whom he could trust to announce themselves for the legislature, either as Whigs or Know-Nothings. He believed "that coalition of the two parties was the only hope for either."

Mr. Lincoln and Judge Davis had frequently been the guests of Dr. Johns during the sessions of the Circuit Court at Monticello; and one evening in the spring of 1854 they came again, this time upon a political mission, which was to ask Dr. Johns to allow himself to be announced as the Whig candidate for Representative to the Nineteenth General Assembly.

The conference which ensued, and in which I was permitted to take part, lasted till midnight, and was so interesting and so impressive that it is indelibly impressed on my memory.

The political situation—national, state and legislative—was freely discussed. Mr. Lincoln's arguments were startling in their intensity, and his attitude towards slavery was one of extreme repulsion. "The question at issue is the Nation, not slavery." "The purpose of squatter sovereignty is to establish a slaveholding empire which shall embrace the entire northwest." "We are in this fight, not to free the black man, but to hold free territory for the white man." "A poisonous exotic has taken deep root in good soil, where it is crowding out every healthy growth. We can't go into our neighbor's field and dig it out, but we can and must prevent its spreading into clean soil, which is the inheritance of the people." "I am not an Abolitionist," he exclaimed. "God in His good time will find a way to rid the Nation of its curse, but emancipation is a grave question which Divine wisdom only can solve." (Little did he dream that within a few years he was destined to be God's agent in the solution of that problem.)

Dr. Johns consented to the announcement of his candidacy for Representative to the Nineteenth General Assembly and Mr. Lincoln at once assumed the control of the campaign. "You are a candidate for a *state* office. Leave national issues in the background. It will be necessary to be all things to all men, as wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove, but always as non-committal as truth will allow." He advised a personal canvass of the district. "Bring state and local issues to the fore. Leave the United States Senatorship as far in the background as the law will allow."

Mr. Lincoln wrote many letters of advice and instruction regarding the conduct of that campaign, in which he showed remarkable insight into the impulses and motives that may be used in influencing men. These letters were so personal that he "advised their destruction as soon as read." If they could have been preserved, they might have been used as valuable lessons in political tactics.

He had traveled the circuit of the courts so many years, when court week was every man's holiday, that he knew the

people collectively and individually, and was prepared to diagnose the politics and prejudices of every man of any influence in every precinct, and to prescribe the special treatment for his particular case. Yet, in discussing the personality of any individual he judged sympathetically and justly. He was always able to put himself into the place of the man he judged and to take into consideration his environment, his heredity and his temptations.

To hold Whigs with southern sympathies to party allegiance, to check the violence of the Abolitionists, to alienate Know-Nothings from the Democratic party, whose senatorial candidate, General Shields, an Irishman, was the difficult task set by Mr. Lincoln for his supporters. Throughout the pre-election campaign the task of adapting the issues to the location was directed by Mr. Lincoln's shrewd hand. Every section of the State and, in some instances, even precinct divisions, had to be diplomatically managed, and though he carefully abstained from apparent interference in the election of members of the legislature, his guiding hand directed the minutest details.

As the Whig candidate for the Senate, he fearlessly took the stump in opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska legislation, and, in October, met Senator Douglas in joint discussion at Springfield, and followed him at numerous other points. The political situation at that time was a complicated one. Know-Nothingism, or the anti-Irish sentiment, was strong in Illinois as is the anti-Japanese feeling of today in California, and was an important factor in the election of the members of the legislature. In central and southern Illinois, to be called an Abolitionist was quite as bad as to be called a thief.

A convention of "men of all parties opposed to the Kansas-Nebraska legislation" met in Springfield October 3, 1854. Prominent Democrats, such as Palmer, Cook and Judd, went to Springfield with the intention and expectation of assisting in the nomination of Mr. Lincoln as the anti-Nebraska candidate for Senator. Dr. Johns had letters from Mr. Lincoln Mr. Palmer, Lieutenant Governor Koerner and others, all of whom believed that with careful management the opposition to the Douglas program could be united.

Unfortunately the rabid Abolitionists took possession of the convention and, by their violence, drove many conserva-

tive men from the support of Mr. Lincoln, who, fearing the effect of this convocation, did not participate in the proceedings. Democrats who were delegates to that convention "bolted," held a separate convention and nominated Lyman Trumbull as "anti-Nebraska Democratic candidate for the Senate."

When the legislature met there was an undoubted anti-Nebraska majority on joint ballot. Mr. Lincoln was the Whig candidate; five anti-Douglas Democrats had pledged themselves to vote to the end for Trumbull, while the Abolitionists, Know-Nothings and Whigs with southern sympathies held the balance of power.

Mr. Lincoln's friends were anxious for an early date for the senatorial election, fearing that delay and debate would intensify the rancor of both parties against the Abolitionists, but the Democratic majority of the Senate filibustered for delay.

Tuesday, the 23d day of January, was finally agreed upon, and the legislature adjourned for the week-end. The majority of its members, with their wives and friends, hastened to Chicago, where the political pot was kept at the boiling point all day Saturday and Sunday. Sunday afternoon a blinding blizzard was raging in Chicago, and members of the legislature, with a host of wire-pullers of all parties, hastened on board the Chicago & Alton train en route for Springfield. About midnight word was passed through the train that they "were stalled" and would have to wait till morning for relief. Morning came, but no relief. The snow plows were also stalled. Hunger began to gnaw at the vitals of the teeming multitude of passengers. The smoking chimneys of a farm house, about half a mile distant, challenged four of the strongest men of the party to a foraging expedition. Wading to their necks in the snow, they reached their goal, and returned with a wash-boiler filled with coffee, tea, bread, butter, eggs, hams, potatoes and other raw provisions. They had bought from the farmer every bit of food that he had stored in his cellar and pantry and smokehouse. Willing hands soon cleared a space upon which a fire could be built. A search for firewood revealed the fact that there were two caterers from Chicago in the baggage car. One was in charge of all the refreshments prepared for a big reception to which

Mrs. Lincoln had issued invitations for Monday evening. The other had with him roast turkeys, hams and tongues, oysters, salads, cakes and ices, for a dinner at the executive mansion Monday noon, to which many of the members of the legislature had been invited by Governor Mattison. The boxes were requisitioned for firewood, but their contents were covered with newspapers and respected as far as possible. Mrs. Lincoln's caterer was equipped with all the paraphernalia requisite for serving three hundred people, including china, table linen and a big coffee urn. A committee of ladies, including Mrs. Pitner of Quincy, Mrs. Dunlap and Mrs. McClernand of Jacksonville, Mrs. Simeon Frances of Springfield, and others from Chicago, took possession of this outfit and gave the caterer a personal guarantee of remuneration for all damages or losses. The wash-boiler from the farmhouse was emptied and filled with snow, which as fast as it melted was strained into the coffee urn through clean napkins. Then eggs and potatoes were boiled in melted snow, and slices of ham were broiled on the points of curtain rods that had been rifled from the sleeping car, and the hungry multitude was served with breakfast.

The cold was intense. Before noon all available fuel was exhausted and the woodwork and seats of the cars were being torn out and split into firewood. At 5 o'clock there was no prospect of immediate release and supper must be provided. A fund was subscribed, and Mrs. Lincoln's refreshments and Governor Mattison's dinner were purchased from the caterers and carefully served to the hungry crowd. Meantime a relief train had been sent out from Chicago with food and fuel and about noon on Tuesday managed to dig through the drifts with welcome relief.

The blockade must have lasted through the entire week, for on Saturday, January 27, 1855, I find the following entry in the Journal of the House of Representatives:

"Mr. Preston offered the following resolutions:

'Resolved, That it is with deep pain and sorrow we learn a large number of the members of this honorable body who, unsuspecting the inclemency of a northern winter, are suffering from its effects in the north at the present time; and deeply sympathizing with the unfortunate in their weary hours of anxiety and peril, a committee of three be appointed from this House to go in search of

the lost expedition, fully empowered to bring the sufferers back if discovered and report to this House the result of their search at as early a day as practicable.

'Resolved, That railroad companies be respectfully solicited to pass the members of this committee on their respective roads, going and coming, free of charge.'

Which was adopted."

The same journal records that from Friday, January 19, 1855, until Wednesday, January 31, 1855, there was no quorum in the House of Representatives.

The day appointed for the election of Senator had passed. Mrs. Lincoln's reception had been abandoned, Governor Mattison's dinner had failed to materialize, and a new day for the election had to be arranged. The 8th of February was finally agreed upon, and at 10 o'clock a. m. the Senate and House of Representatives assembled in joint session to elect a United States Senator.

On the first ballot forty-five votes were cast for Mr. Lincoln, forty-one for General Shields, five for Mr. Trumbull, two for Mr. Koerner and one each for six other candidates, one member not voting. Six ballots followed quickly, Shields holding steadily forty-two votes, while Lincoln fell to thirty-six. On the seventh ballot the Democrats changed to Governor Mattison, through whose personal popularity they hoped to win. The eighth and ninth ballots increased Mattison's vote to forty-seven, which was conceded to be his utmost strength. The opposition vote on these two ballots was cast wildly and with no other purpose than to obtain delay. The forty-five votes cast for Mr. Lincoln on the first ballot were secure, the two for Mr. Koerner would be voted for Mr. Lincoln whenever they would elect him. The seven scattering votes were all pledged for Free Soil. It was near noon and a recess was taken until 2 o'clock. The Whigs were confident that during this recess enough of the scattering vote would be secured to elect Mr. Lincoln.

The five Democrats who had pledged themselves to "vote for Trumbull to the bitter end" were thought invulnerable, and without some of their votes Mattison could not be elected. The noon recess was spent in hard work by all of Mr. Lincoln's supporters and at 1 o'clock they were jubilant with the certainty of success.

As the wife of a member of the House, and a decided Lincoln partisan, I had been an interested spectator of the proceedings. I went from the State House directly to my room, which was separated from the adjoining parlor by closed folding doors. I was resting quietly on my bed, which stood against these doors, when three men entered the adjoining room. My attention was first attracted by hearing one of these men say: "They do not expect to elect him on the next ballot, but are sure to on the eleventh or twelfth unless we head them off."

Two of these men were evidently members of the legislature. Considerations, political and financial, which seemed to have been previously discussed, were merely alluded to, but the program of procedure was minutely arranged. One of these men, whose name came near the head of the roll call, was to "change his vote to Mattison after Allen and Baker had voted for Trumbull," and this was to be the signal for a stampede for Mattison. "Three more votes were secure and others will follow," they said. The roll call was then carefully gone over and the probable vote of each man noted and checked.

I listened intently, but was not able to fully grasp their scheme, though I did understand their conclusions. "Your votes will assure the election of Mattison on the next ballot, and I give you my personal guarantee for the fulfillment of our contract," was the final sentence I heard as they left the room.

I hastened immediately to the State House, sent for Dr. Johns, told him the story, and was taken to a private room, where I met Mr. Lincoln and repeated to him as nearly as I could the exact words of the interview I had overheard. I had either forgotten or had not heard the names of either of these men. Mr. Lincoln, who seemed almost stunned, walked the floor without a word of comment; then picked up a list of the members of the legislature, which was on a table in the room, and after scanning it carefully, said very sternly, "I don't think *he* will vote for Mattison."

A few gentlemen, one of whom I remember was John M. Palmer, were summoned in haste, and I was asked to repeat the story. It was evidently an unexpected blow and was re-

ceived almost in silence. Mr. Lincoln rose from his seat, where he had seemed for a moment almost in a state of collapse, and said: "Gentlemen, Lyman Trumbull must be elected to the Senate on the next ballot!" Turning back at the door, he said: "I ask as an especial favor that this disclosure be kept a profound secret." I have no personal recollection of what followed. How or when I reached the gallery of the House of Representatives, I do not know.

The assembly had already convened and there was not a moment to be lost. Every member of the assembly was in his seat. The clerk had risen to begin the roll call when Mr. Lincoln suddenly appeared at the head of the aisle and with a commanding gesture and clear voice announced that he withdrew his name from the contest and then walked down the aisles of the House and personally requested his adherents to vote for Mr. Trumbull on the next ballot, the result of which was fifty-one votes for Trumbull and forty-seven for Mattison. The unknown had evidently *not* voted for Mattison.

Mr. Lincoln's disappointment was evident, the greater because he had been assured that in addition to the forty-five votes he had received on the first ballot, four of the scattering votes had been secured for him, that Mattison's utmost strength was forty-seven, and that his friends were confident he would eventually receive the fifty-one votes necessary to an election. But with the disclosure of this new plot immediate action was demanded, and Mr. Lincoln decided, without hesitation or advice, to sacrifice personal ambition to the cause of freedom.

Thus did Fate once again, through bitter disappointment, reserve Lincoln for a greater destiny.

During the excitement that followed the announcement of the ballot I received a message from Mr. Lincoln. It was: "Please forget it all. No one knows that there were traitors in our camp, and no one must ever know. That is a closed incident."

I do not know when, or through whom, Mr. Trumbull heard my story, but I do know that after his election there was always a warm personal friendship between our families. I was invited to visit Mrs. Trumbull at Alton, and later at

Springfield and throughout his senatorial career Mr. Trumbull sent me many valuable public documents, one of which—a twelve-volume report of the first survey for a Pacific Railroad—I afterwards presented to the Decatur Public Library. Mr. Lincoln's injunction to secrecy was respected and obeyed until long after his death and not until time and events had demonstrated that secrecy was falsifying history did I decide to tell the world the true history of his self-sacrificing heroism.

The election of Mr. Trumbull proved to be the death blow of the Whig party in Illinois. The bloody fight for the admission of Kansas as a slave state had unified the anti-slavery sentiment. Opposition to squatter sovereignty and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise had obliterated old party lines, but the new combination of Whigs, Democrats and Free Soilers, while acting in harmony, had no distinct organization or party name. In breaking away from old party affiliations, both Democrats and Whigs objected to the name of Free Soilers because of its taint of Abolitionism. Anti-Nebraska had by common acceptance been the cognomen of the new party. The name "Republican" had been suggested, but had received no official endorsement.

The editors of Illinois "opposed to the anti-Nebraska bill" had called a meeting to be held in Decatur February 22, for the purpose of making arrangements for the organization of the anti-Nebraska forces in this State for the coming contest, and all editors favoring the movement were requested to forward a copy of their paper containing their approval to the "office of the Illinois State Chronicle, at Decatur." William J. Usrey was the editor of the Chronicle, and was made secretary of the convention. The call received the formal endorsement of twenty-five papers a number of which had formerly been Democratic.

The convention met in the parlor of the Cassell House (now St. Nicholas) and adopted a series of resolutions organizing a new party, "to be named the Republican party." They appointed a state central committee, with authority to call a state convention. A banquet was given in the evening, at which "the infant was christened," and Mr. Lincoln, who was the only invited guest, "made the speech of the evening."

Decatur, therefore, proudly claims the honor of being the birthplace of the great Republican party. The Pittsburgh convention effected a national organization on the same day, but the name was a Decatur product and Abraham Lincoln its sponsor.

Two years later the Republican party of Illinois chose Mr. Lincoln as their champion against Mr. Douglas in the great contest for the Illinois senatorship. It was a forlorn hope which was thus entrusted to his charge, but though his frank and almost radical utterances, in the series of historical debates with Mr. Douglas, insured his own defeat for the Senate, he managed to compel his opponent to so discredit himself with the slavery propaganda of the south as to insure his defeat when a candidate for President.

Mr. Lincoln accepted his defeat as final, but after this most heartbreaking of his disappointments he was able to say:

"I am glad I made the race, and, though I now sink out of view, I believe I have made some marks which will tell for the cause of civil liberty long after I am gone." It was this spirit which in the end made his record "a story of failures that succeeded."

Note.—Mrs. Johns the author of the two articles presented in this number of the Journal is also the author of a most interesting volume entitled "Personal Recollections, 1849-1865." She has been a resident of Decatur since 1849.